

LADYBUG INDUSTRIES: MAINTENANCE SPECIALISTS

Frank Timmon's Ladybug Industries landed its first commercial landscape maintenance job five years ago. The company now has three locations in Florida (Jacksonville, Fernandina Beach, and Boca Raton) and is grossing in the area of \$545,000 a year. The company performs only maintenance work, and some plant replacement and installation of annuals.

"We basically don't advertise. We have a quarter-page in the Yellow Pages, but for the last three years we've done no soliciting at all," says Timmons. "We've got a very good reputation in the cities and we're known for quality."

How does a company which doesn't advertise account for a 28 percent increase in business over the year before? "The bulk of our business is coming from good clients who have opened another facility or

bought another piece of property, or are operating in another city and want us to look at that. I think word of mouth and reputation has contributed to our growth as much as anything," says Timmons.

The company has 37 full-time employees. "We shoot for \$9.00 to \$9.50 per man hour," Timmons says. "We bid a lot of our work on condominiums and apartments on a unit cost basis. This will run anywhere from \$5.50 to \$8.00 a unit per month, depending on the density of the project, how much mowing there is to do, and how much shrubbery and bed work there is. You can put a good-sized mower in there and mow like crazy. Get in and get out. Others are quite sophisticated in their landscaping and they are time consuming."

Ladybug Industries handles only about 15-20 customers per year. "We

Royal Palm Plaza in Boca Raton is maintained by Ladybug.



Ladybug Industries



Ladybug keeps the busy shopping center trim and colorful. It has numerous courtyards and tree-lined walkways.



don't have a tremendous number of customers," says Timmons, "we've just got good-sized customers."

Business for Ladybug Industries is seasonal to an extent. "We start cutting the crew down around the first to 15th of October," says Timmons. "Then we'll build it back up between the 15th of March to the 15th of May, depending on how the weather goes."

The company does fertilization and shrubbery spraying, in addition to other maintenance work such as mowing. At this time, all large areas of lawn spraying are subcontracted, though there are plans to add this service in the future.

Shrubbery spraying involves several different chemicals, says Timmons, but they are readily available and we don't maintain large inventories. "We do have enough on hand to do anything we want to when we need to do it. Right now, we spend annually \$5,000 to \$7,000 on chemicals and about \$30,000 to \$32,000 on fertilizers. We find that granular is better for our purposes."

Getting and maintaining good equipment seems to be a general headache for large-scale landscape contractors. Timmons echoes that sentiment. "The equipment that is available for landscape maintenance is either for the homeowner, or it's geared toward golf course operation. "We're much harder on equipment because we're mobile. We're loading and unloading either once, twice, even five or six times a day from a truck or trailer and it just gets used much harder. For example, we'll run an edger five to seven man-hours per day. The edgers that are available today are also those available to homeowners, where they might edge for an hour or two every two weeks. They just do not hold up.

Ladybug Industries probably spends \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year for new equipment. Approximately \$24,000 to \$25,000 is spent annually for equipment parts and repair.

As far as equipment inventory, Ladybug Industries maintains one car, a four-wheel drive vehicle, six vans, and two pickups. It owns two Kubota diesel tractors (17½ and 22 hp), two 16 hp tractors, and a number of Toro Groundmasters for mowing. All equipment is owned. Other equipment includes about 35 push

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Ladybug Industries



The plaza contains almost 200 different shops and offices.



mowers, two Ryan thatchers, and three sprayers (25, 55, and 100 gallon). These sprayers are geared for hand nozzle spraying, all that is needed for the shrubbery spraying Ladybug does.

Four employees are certified pesticide applicators; all are in a supervisory capacity.

Finding qualified people is getting to be less of a problem according to Timmons. "When I first started there wasn't much interest in maintenance per say, but in the last three years it has begun to change."

"We're getting more and more inquiries from people who are graduating or will be graduating. We do still find, however, that the college graduate is not as interested in maintenance as he is in growing and landscaping, architecture, or design/build, that sort of thing.

"We will expand in the future. The type of things we will go into will be irrigation, the spraying end of the business, and of course, heavier into maintenance. We could possibly develop remedial crews where we go in and refurbish a landscape. I don't think though, at this-point-in-time, that we will get into design/build, reclamation, or that sort of thing."

Timmons feels that government regulations pose a problem. "We're concerned with EPA actions, especially the nematode problem. EPA has taken all the effective chemicals off the market. If we can't cure a problem like nematodes, the grass is slowly but surely going to be eaten up and we won't have any work to do.

"Our industry has made some good strides in the last couple of years. However, I do feel that, as far as a professionalism is concerned, we've still have a long way to go. We're probably the only service business that still is not looked upon as a professional service."

"I think the future of our business is quite bright. I see more large companies getting much larger. I see a lot of opportunity for us. Primarily because bigger and bigger jobs are becoming available. The small guy just is not going to be financially able to handle those kinds of opportunities.

"We do need to work continually to get to the point where we're considered professionals.